

AN IMPORTANT NEW MOVIE, and a fresh debate over a national apology, show that even after more than a century America's 'original sin' still haunts the national psyche. By Jonathan Alter

# The Long Shadow of Slavery

**F**or nations, like people, distant memory of trauma can be submerged and repressed but never extinguished. It surfaces in words, in politics and sometimes in the movies.

In the middle of Steven Spielberg's new film, "Amistad," which opens next week, comes "the Middle Passage"—the journey of Africans to the New World.

Like the Nazi rampage through the Jewish ghetto

in "Schindler's List," these spare scenes are among the most wrenching ever put on film. They take us closer than we have ever been to a realistic depiction of slaves being beaten, whipped, shot to death and thrown overboard, of African mothers giving birth and committing suicide. You can almost smell the fetid conditions belowdecks, where slaves, fed only a small handful of yams a day, are stacked like coal, only to be buffed up when the ship lands and the auction nears.

The "peculiar institution" of slavery is experiencing a peculiar revival of interest. Not just in Hollywood, but in the debate over everything from whether the United States should apologize for it to whether to rename schools that commemorate slave owners. Long described as America's original sin, slavery is also our shadow: dogging our steps forward, projecting in black against the sunlight of democratic ideals. For a time, the civil-rights movement seemed to subordinate slavery to its own fresher, more redemptive

**Hale Woodruff, 'Mutiny Aboard the Amistad' (detail), 1939, Talladega College**





“We don’t need a victim’s gold card, we don’t need people feeling guilty about slavery; the idea of guilt just makes them madder.”

— STANLEY CROUCH, *social critic*

narrative. But the shame and confusion keep pushing out of the past, insistently ringing what Thomas Jefferson, our slaveholding author of freedom, called America’s “fire-bell in the night.”

If slavery is “bursting at the seam of our historical memory,” as author Michael Eric Dyson puts it, how best to explain it in popular culture? How to remember that America won a war that ended slavery, then managed to lose the peace? What is owed American blacks for a legacy of degradation that began, but hardly ended, with involuntary servitude? Where does acknowledgment of pain stop—and excuse-making begin? No clear answers are on the horizon, of course. But raising the questions—with all sides checking their spleens at the door—might inform the larger dialogue that President Clinton hopes to help stimulate at this week’s town meeting on race in Akron, Ohio. The goal should then be, as Abraham Lincoln said, to “think anew and act anew.”

With the country—or at least much of the white majority—tired of constant recriminations over present-day racism, slavery might offer another, more cathartic way to confront deeper race issues. “America has never come to grips with slavery,” says Jesse Jackson. “It’s a hole in the American soul.” Others argue we’re gripping too hard and drilling the hole ourselves. “You can’t win by constantly thinking about your injuries,” argues Robert Woodson, a black conservative who runs the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. “What are the lessons to be learned that we haven’t been told over and over again?”

But have we truly been told? Slavery is such a gash in the national psyche that mainstream American culture rarely dares to touch it; the “Roots” mini-series was more than two decades ago. So Spielberg will try to do for slavery what he did for the Holocaust—to bring a vast audience face to face with both the horror and the subtlety of the crimes of history. Americans, alas, now absorb historical information less from books than from popular entertainment. That makes any Spielberg film about the past an important event—and a genuine opportunity for education.

“Amistad” is actually the director’s second run at African-Ameri-



Jacob Lawrence, “Harriet Tubman,” Series No. 2, 1939–1940

can themes. He tried once before with “The Color Purple,” but by remaining faithful to the Alice Walker novel he antagonized those who disliked that film’s depiction of black men. This time his lens on the subject is the true story of a bloody 1839 slave rebellion aboard a Spanish ship, *La Amistad*, off the coast of Cuba. The 53 slaves, led by a Mende tribesman named Joseph Cinqué (played powerfully by Djimon Hounsou), end up captured by the U.S. Navy off New York’s Long Island, and imprisoned. The *Amistad*

case becomes an abolitionist cause célèbre that goes to the Supreme Court, where former president John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) makes an impassioned plea for the slaves and wins. The Supreme Court decision is read by a justice played by retired real-life justice Harry Blackmun.

The film takes some literary license: Adams never entertained Cinqué in his home; his actual argument to the Supreme Court was highly legalistic, not a bald appeal to conscience. Even so, “Amistad” stays more true to the facts than most big-budget historical dramas. And it manages to simultaneously echo modern-day frustrations over the justice system and put a positive spin on the use of legal technicalities to advance larger causes. Spielberg wants it clear that “this story is about American history not just African history ... The courtroom was really the heart of it.” When Cinqué stands in court and shouts over and over, “Give us free! Give us free!” the struggle of the African for justice in America reverberates across the generations and out into the theater audience.

“Amistad,” the movie, has its own courthouse troubles. Barbara Chase-Riboud, author of a novel based on the case called “Echo of Lions,” has filed a \$10 million lawsuit charging that DreamWorks SKG plagiarized her work. She claims “Amistad” borrowed from her the idea of creating the character of a fictional abolitionist editor, played by Morgan Freeman.

DreamWorks’ best argument may be that the *Amistad* case was not some obscure episode but one of the most-publicized legal cases of the entire pre-Civil War period, with several black abolitionists like the Freeman composite character involved. In the years since, the story has been obscure for most Americans but familiar to many blacks. Recall that the revolutionary who kidnapped heiress Patricia Hearst in the 1970s assumed the nom de guerre “Cinqué.”

The film is part of a whole new round of slavery projects, including a Lyric Opera version of “Amistad” that opened in Chicago last week. Unlike the film, this is a black-conceived and -managed project by Anthony Davis with libretto by Thulani Davis and directed by George C. Wolfe. An A&E documentary debuts Dec. 16. Oprah

# America's 'Own Holocaust'

A historian finds the vestiges of slavery alive

**J**OHN HOPE FRANKLIN is the author of "From Slavery to Freedom," a classic of African-American history and one of the country's most decorated scholars. Last summer President Clinton appointed Franklin, 82, chairman of his presidential race advisory board. Clinton will lead a "town meeting" on race in Akron, Ohio, this week amid criticism of the board's slow pace and reluctance to hear opposing viewpoints. In his direct style, Franklin spoke with NEWSWEEK'S Karen Breslau:

## On slavery's impact today:

It's both a historical fact and a very powerful force that casts a shadow over the present. When you talk about the role of slavery, ask why do people look at me and think that I'm their servant? What the hell is that all about? If they haven't somehow come to the conclusion that I'm here to serve them the way my ancestors 150 years ago were there to serve theirs. Imagine asking an 82-year-old man to fetch anything for them? Or to serve them, to get their coat or their car or to call me "boy."



That's the shadow that's over this whole thing.

## At 82, Franklin is trying to shape a 'national conversation' about race

### On history and the conversation about race:

I don't think a conversation on race can take place without a discussion of the development and perfection of the doctrine of racial superiority that was more carefully and more successfully projected after slavery than during slavery. It was after slavery that you get some of the most barbaric, uncivilized manifestations of hate and of the sense of white superiority. I think in

part [that happened] because whites are poor losers. This country has never confronted its own Holocaust, its own violence.

### On eliminating slave owners' names from public schools:

I don't think we should try to rewrite history. George Washington was what he was, and I think the students ought to know that he led the armies through the Revolution; that, at

long last, he brought African-Americans into the patriot army; that he was president of the Constitutional Convention. And that he was a large slaveholder.

**On apologizing for slavery:** If I were president I don't think I would. What does it do? I don't think it will advance the cause of equality. You can tell me you're sorry, but it won't make me feel any better, it

won't get me a better situation in life, a better job, an extra month in school.

### On affirmative action:

I would favor affirmative action over this empty gesture of an apology. I'm talking about opportunities, which African-Americans or Latinos don't have, or some Asian-Americans don't have. I'm in favor of affirmative action, but I'm not in favor of affirmative action that we've had for 300 years; namely affirmative action for whites. When I was getting ready to go to graduate school, every white person in the state of Oklahoma could go to the University of Oklahoma that my daddy was paying taxes for. I had to send to Oklahoma my grades from Harvard so they would send me my \$100 towards tuition. No white person in Oklahoma had to do that. When they tried to set up [a] system that would create for blacks the type of opportunities that had existed for whites for 200 years, they said, "Oh, this is terrible; this is awful, un-American, unconstitutional, illegal."

### On hopes for better race relations:

If you had asked me a year ago I'm not sure I would've been optimistic. But from where I sit now I am. I am overwhelmed by the expressions of enthusiastic support for what we are trying to do.

Winfrey is finishing "Beloved," based on Toni Morrison's novel about a former slave and scheduled for release next year. Director Chris Columbus ("Home Alone") is bringing the story of abolitionist John Brown to the screen, and Danny Glover is developing a story about an 18th-century slave insurrection in Haiti.

While a "slavery memorial" is conspicuously absent from the Mall in Washington, D.C., museums devoted to the struggles against slavery and other accomplishments of African-Americans are popping up. Detroit has a magnificent Museum of African American History and Cincinnati is preparing a \$70 million museum devoted to the underground railroad, the network of black and white abolitionists who helped slaves escape to the North.

There's a lot of catching up to do. Beyond the classroom, where instruction on slavery is improving, even those interested in history have often been shielded from its harsher truths. As recently as 1994, the journalist David Shipler visited Mt. Vernon and found that the tour of George Washington's mansion offered no mention that the "father of his country" had held slaves there. No one even noted

that Washington, unlike Jefferson, freed his slaves on his death.

But by the time Shipler returned this year, some honesty was peeking through. Now, a descendant of slaves from a neighboring farm provides a vivid supplemental tour explaining that the overseer was stingy and slave children were forced to sleep on rags. White college interns spend summers there re-creating the lives of plantation slaves and pretending to experience the real thing. Not surprisingly, some whites aren't happy about the changes. According to Shipler's "A Country of Strangers," one white visitor told the black tour guide: "We came to hear about George Washington, not about you."

So where should the rewriting of history stop? It's understandable that the New Orleans school board would erase the names of Confederate generals from largely black schools. But last month it went a step further and took Washington's name off an elementary school, which was renamed for Dr. Charles R. Drew, an African-American who pioneered the blood transfusion. Even that might be fine, as long as Washington's accomplishments are still taught. The writer Sol Stern found that the only George Washington his son had

“America has never come to grips with slavery. It is a hole on America’s soul because it is such an institutional shame.”

—JESSE JACKSON, activist

learned about in his New York City public school was George Washington Carver.

Some of the new sensitivity about symbols of slavery involves not just morality but money. At the University of Mississippi, college officials are upset with students and alumni who insist on waving the Confederate battle flag at Ole Miss football games; it turns out the flag hurts the university’s athletic recruiting—and ultimately its fund-raising. Christie’s auction house last month quickly bowed to pressure and canceled an auction of 19th-century slavery posters. It’s not only wrong (Christie’s never had an auction of Nazi memorabilia) but looks bad; scares away customers.

**I**N THE POLITICAL REALM, CLINTON AND REP. TONY Hall, Democrat of Ohio, launched a debate last spring over whether the U.S. government should formally apologize for slavery, as Germany did for Nazism. The idea hasn’t taken off, in part because no one can agree on what to apologize for—or what it would accomplish. A day of general repentance? Clinton and Congress apologizing for events 130 years ago? What happens the day after an apology?

Some suggest the apology should be quite specific. Ronald Tabaki, an ethnic-studies professor at Berkeley, argues that an apology is in order for not better recognizing that the Union wouldn’t have been saved without black troops who entered the Civil War in 1863. But Stephan Thernstrom, author with his wife, Abigail, of the new book “America in Black and White,” says the whole idea is silly. “I think 600,000 deaths [the toll of the Civil War] and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments are apologies ... If we want to seriously consider apologizing, the African nations are also to blame. This was a global phenomenon.”

The most common response from both blacks and whites is summarized by Eric Foner, a history professor at Columbia: “Apologizing is the easy way out. [It] could be seen as a substitute for something more substantive.”

Even commemoration is complicated. While Jews have ritualized

their ancient bondage in Egypt with an annual Passover Seder, African-Americans have a more ambivalent attitude toward their painful past. Young blacks in particular don’t seem anxious to dwell on slavery. “When I think about slavery it just makes me mad,” says Troi Cain, a 15-year-old at Dunwoody High School in Atlanta. “I get mad at white people for doing that to us and makes me think all white people are bad, but I know they’re not.”

At a minimum, the increased attention to slavery might help straighten out some misconceptions. In his comprehensive new book, “The Slave Trade,” Hugh Thomas, an eminent British historian, points out that responsibility for slavery extends more widely through the British and American Northern establishment than is generally known. Everyone from the founder of Brown University, to John Locke, philosopher of liberty, were at least investors in slave-trading companies if not traders themselves.

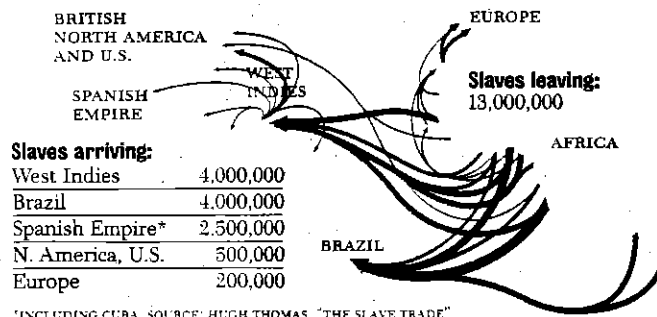
Thomas argues the worst blame should be assigned to royal families, among them Louis XIV of France and Ferdinand of Spain, as well as the African rulers of Benin, Ashanti, Congo and other kingdoms who for generations sold Africans from other tribes to European traders, often in exchange for cloth. (Even today, pockets of slavery remain in Mauritania.) Slavery was also present in the Islamic world.

Ironically, about the only group that Thomas absolves of blame is the one fingered by Louis Farrakhan and other anti-Semites. Thomas, who writes that one of his own Christian ancestors might have been implicated, could identify only two out of thousands of Anglo-Saxon traders who were Jewish. (A few Portuguese traders had been born Jews but converted.) More broadly, many Americans wrongly believe that the American South held the bulk of transatlantic slaves. In fact, of the roughly 11 million black slaves who survived the journey to the New World between the mid-1500s and the mid-1800s, only 4.5 percent (500,000) came to North America; the majority went to Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica and Haiti, though many were sold to the United States from there.

Some African-Americans, invoking the compensation that was recently provided Japanese-Americans interned during World War II, are resuming a longstanding fight for reparations. But that would be impractical financially and probably counterproductive

## In American Bondage

The European slave trade was both lucrative and brutal. Historians estimate that between 10 and 15 percent of the slaves who left Africa died along the route of the “Middle Passage.”



1619

**First African Slaves**  
Jamestown, Va.’s John Rolfe (Pocahontas’s widower) records the arrival of a Dutch ship bearing the Colonies’ first 20 African slaves.

1787

**Three-Fifths Clause**  
To determine the number of congressmen, the Constitution counts each slave as  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a person. Virginia slave price: £40.

circa 1804

**Underground Railroad**  
Abolitionists and free blacks respond to Fugitive Slave Act by ferrying runaways to Canada. All told, some 75,000 find freedom.



**Faith Ringgold, '#3; Born in a Cotton Field,' quilt from a series, The American Collection, 1997**

politically. The Japanese-Americans were compensated for the loss of their own freedom, not that of their ancestors. That gave them a claim of lost income. What's more, Americans whose forebears didn't own slaves (even in the antebellum South, 95 percent did not) or arrived here after slavery ended are understandably resistant to the idea that they bear direct responsibility for slavery because of their skin color.

It's more persuasive to argue that society owes an *indirect* debt to African-Americans, the only Americans who came to this country wholly against their will. Here, some knowledge of slavery helps provide context to explain why African-Americans differ from immigrant groups. "When you think about affirmative action, people say, 'My God, you've had 30 years [of it]! Wasn't that enough?' But we were enslaved for almost 300," says Velma Maia Thomas, who manages a black cultural center and bookstore in Atlanta. Orlando Patterson, a black Harvard professor, argues that "the thing that makes African-Americans special is the period of Jim Crow which

was very much a kind of slave system except without individual masters." In other words, blacks were essentially in bondage into the 1960s.

Patterson argues that the problem of blacks is not so much poverty as this legacy of slave owners breaking up families: "It's not normal for men to abandon their children the way you see in underclass behavior. In no part of the world do you get this phenomenon except among ex-slave populations in the New World," he argues, challenging the scholarship of Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman, who claim that black family structure stayed relatively intact during slavery. "You can't explain that in terms of poverty: in fact, poverty often brings families closer together. You have to explain it by over 275 years of assault on the key roles of father and husband. It messed up the gender relations of African-American men and women, and they're still very fragile."

The challenge is to focus on that problem without condescending to blacks or guilt-tripping whites. Stanley Crouch is an iconoclastic black critic who is impatient with what he sees as an effort by some blacks to trump Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. "We don't need a victims' gold card, and we don't need people feeling guilty about slavery; the whole idea of guilt just makes people madder," Crouch says. Taking aim at Afrocentrism, he argues that "the key is there was never any abolitionist movement in Africa," where tribes generally lacked democratic traditions, and slaves had little chance for freedom. Even though they owned slaves, Crouch says, at least the American founders set up a system that could eventually end slavery: "What we need are people who recognize that integrated teams have always been instrumental in the advancement of the country. From abolishing slavery to ending

segregation, blacks never did it alone."

"Amistad" may help here. The film is not just about Cinqué's magnificent pride and defiance and the suffering he and his fellow slaves endured. It's also about white lawyers and judges—many of them slaveholders—who applied the law to free them. Ultimately, that legal victory wasn't nearly enough. "He has far more questions than answers," Cinqué says of John Quincy Adams. Americans couldn't answer the basic questions about race in 1839 and it led to war. We can't answer them fully today, but it's still too soon and too important to stop trying.

With VERN E. SMITH and ALLISON SAMUELS

1808

#### Slave Trade Outlawed

An act of Congress prohibits importing "negro, mulatto, or person of colour, as a slave." From the first, law is flouted widely.

1820

#### Missouri Compromise

After bitter debate, Missouri is admitted to the Union as a slave state to maintain equal numbers of slave and free states.

1839

#### Amistad Mutiny

A Spanish ship commandeered by 53 rebellious slaves lands on Long Island. After a lengthy extradition case, they are freed.

1857

#### Dred Scott Decision

The Supreme Court rules that American-born slaves have no rights under Constitution. U.S. price for a slave: about \$500.

1861-65

#### The Civil War

Abolitionist fever builds, and the South secedes. In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in Confederate states.

Dec. 18, 1865

#### 13th Amendment

The states ratify constitutional amendment guaranteeing that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist."